

The Utopian Vision, East and West

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ESSAYS

The Utopian Vision, East and West[1]

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"IN THE STRICTEST SENSE OF THE WORD, utopia came into being at the beginning of the sixteenth century," thus Roland Schaer begins his introductory essay in an important recent publication on utopia. He emphasizes the historical significance of Thomas More's work and asserts that "the history of utopia necessarily begins with Thomas More" (Schaer 3). In the same volume, however, Lyman Tower Sargent understands utopia in a much broader sense and traces the theme of utopianism throughout history. "Not every culture appears to have utopias brought about through human effort that predate knowledge of More's *Utopia*," says Sargent, "but such utopias do exist in China, India, and various Buddhist and Islamic cultures" (Sargent 8). Whether utopia is a sixteenth-century European invention or something much larger in scope and can be found much earlier in different cultural traditions—this is the question I am concerned with in this essay. If at the most basic level, the idea of utopia suggests the vision of an alternative and better society beyond reality, then, it already implies some degree of discontent with the *status quo* and its critique, therefore the utopian vision invariably presents itself as a social commentary, an allegory of the desire for change and transformation. Such a desire seems to be deeply ingrained in the very nature of the human condition, as no one in any society is unwilling, if not actively trying, to make life better and achieve the optimum out of our limited resources and capabilities. The desire for utopia is thus everywhere, as Oscar Wilde puts it eloquently with his typical wit and elegance: "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias" (Wilde 28).

The desire for utopia is not only universal but also perennial, as the prospect of a better society lies always ahead, at the end of an ever-receding future in front of us, the end of a new millennium. From the biblical Garden of Eden, Plato's *Republic*, to the long list of literary utopias, there is a rich tradition of imagining the best commonwealth in Western philosophy, literature, and political theory. But is utopia accessible through conceptual as well as linguistic translatability? Is utopia translatable across the gap of cultural differences? Does the utopian vision manifest itself in the East, for example, in Chinese philosophy and literature? Are there expressions of the

desire for an alternative and better society in Chinese texts? Such questions would have seemed unnecessary if there had not been so much emphasis on the uniqueness of cultures and the untranslatability of terms. Before trying to answer these questions, however, let us first consider utopia in the West. Where is that utopian country at which Wilde saw humanity always landing and always setting sail to? In what context did it arise, and what does it look like? We must first search for utopia and find its most salient features before we can argue with any degree of assurance whether its core concept transcends the specific boundaries of languages and cultural traditions.

Utopia and Secularism

"Utopia expresses and explores what is desired," says Ruth Levitas in concluding her study of the various definitions and approaches in utopian studies. "The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire—the desire for a better way of being" (Levitas 191). Levitas surveys many works on utopia and argues that definitions on the basis of content, form, or function all tend to be too restrictive, while the broad definition she offers purports to accommodate all the different kinds of utopias. Her attempt at a broad and inclusive definition seems encouraging, and yet her concept of utopia is not without restrictions of her own, for she seems reluctant to ground her concept in anything that might be suspect of being "essentialist" or "universalist", such as human nature. Instead, Levitas emphasizes the constructedness of the concept. Although the "desire for a better way of being" may sound universal, utopia, she argues, "is a social construct which arises not from a 'natural' impulse subject to social mediation, but as a socially constructed response to an *equally* socially constructed gap between the needs and wants by a particular society and the satisfactions available to and distributed by it" (181–82). Without positing some basic impulse in the human psyche or human nature, however, the very idea or metaphor of a social construction may seem empty or rootless; and one may wonder why there is so much "desire for a better way of being" in so many different cultures and societies in the first place? What is the basis for any kind of social construction, utopian or otherwise? In fact, the idea of human nature and that of constructedness need not be mutually exclusive, for it is precisely on the notion of some basic characteristics of human nature that utopia or the idea of "a better way of being" is constructed.

In one of the most comprehensive and engaging discussions of utopia, Krishan Kumar relates the concept of utopia first with the changed meaning of human nature in the Renaissance. The Genesis story of the fall of man supplies the basic text for reflection on human nature in the West, and the early Christians and their Jewish predecessors, as Elaine Pagels points out, first understood Adam's disobedience and its terrible consequences as a story about choice and human freedom. Although Jews and early Christians all accepted the idea that Adam's sin brought suffering and death upon mankind, Pagels observes that they "would also have agreed that Adam left each

of his offspring free to make his or her own choice of good or evil. The whole point of the story of Adam, most Christians assumed, was to warn everyone who heard it not to misuse that divinely given capacity for free choice" (108). It was St. Augustine on a very different social and historical background for Christianity, now a state religion rather than a persecuted clandestine sect, that radically altered earlier interpretations of the Genesis story and offered an analysis of human nature that became, "for better and worse, the heritage of all subsequent generations of western Christians and the major influence on their psychological and political thinking" (Pagels xxvi). Augustine and the medieval Church under his influence saw human nature as essentially bad, irrevocably corrupted by the original sin Adam committed in eating of the forbidden tree. If John Chrysostom emphasized moral choice and individual responsibility in arguing that the example of Adam served as a warning for each individual to take responsibility for his own deeds, Augustine would see Adam not as an individual but as a corporate personality, the symbol of all humanity. "In the first man," says Augustine, "there existed the whole human nature, which was to be transmitted by the woman to posterity, when that conjugal union received the divine sentence of its own condemnation; and what man was made, not when created, but when he sinned and was punished, this he propagated, so far as the origin of sin and death are concerned" (Augustine 414). Pagels argues that Augustine's reading turns the story about free choice into a story of human bondage, for he insisted that "every human being is in bondage not only from birth but indeed from the moment of conception" (Pagels 109). Nothing free can arise, according to Augustine, from human nature "as from a corrupt root," contaminated by the original sin (Augustine 423). In such a view, then, human beings cannot possibly save themselves but can only hope to be redeemed by Jesus Christ, to have their souls received by God in Heaven after death. What Augustine called the City of God was thus conceived in direct opposition to the City of Man. The two cities, as Augustine put it, "have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience" (477). Augustine's City of God was obviously the opposite of any human commonwealth; its nature was spiritual rather than material, and its realization in Heaven, not on earth.

That is where utopia as a concept differs fundamentally from the ideology of the medieval Church, because utopia is an ideal society built by human beings in this life on earth, not a vision of God's paradise in Heaven. Kumar argues persuasively that there is "a fundamental contradiction between religion and utopia," because "religion typically has an otherworldly concern; utopia's interest is in this world" (*Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 10). To be sure, there is the story of paradise in the Bible, but the point of that story, as we have seen in Augustine's interpretation, is to tell us about the origin of sin and death. As Alain Touraine remarks, "the history of

utopia began only when society abandoned the image of paradise. Utopia is one of the products of secularization" (29). In any case, the biblical paradise is forever lost because of man's first disobedience, and it would be nothing but incredible arrogance and blasphemy, from a religious point of view, to entertain the possibility that human beings could build a paradise on earth unaided by divine power. What Augustine tried to do in *The City of God*, says Kumar, is to warn against "too much absorption in the affairs of the earthly city, as leading to an alienation from the heavenly city of God." If sin and corruption dominate the world, and if human beings are all sinners, what could the ideal of a utopia be except a manifestation of human pride and arrogance? And that, as Kumar observes, "seems to have been the general attitude towards utopianism during the Christian Middle Ages, when Augustine's influence was paramount in orthodox theological circles. The *comtemptus mundi* was profoundly discouraging to utopian speculation; as a result, the Middle Ages are a conspicuously barren period in the history of utopian thought" (11).

To be sure, there are utopian elements in Christian doctrine, such as the richly imagined Garden of Eden, the meliorist belief in the human capacity to improve, and the idea of the millennium. All these ideas already existed in Judaism, and some of the Jewish concepts, particularly the apocalypse and messianic prophecies, were further developed in Christianity and articulated in a potent mystical form in the Revelation. For Jews the prophets spoke about the coming of a Messiah at the end of time, in the apocalyptic vision of the "end of the days," but for Christians, Jesus was the Messiah who had come and died, and whose Second Coming would deliver all the good souls to the hand of God in Heaven. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth," proclaims St. John, "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. . . . And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (The King James Translation, Rev. 21:1–4). In its expectation of a perfectly happy condition of things cleansed of suffering and miseries in this world, the millennium is thus very close to the utopian vision, and the various millenarian sects in the medieval and early modern times constituted a most serious challenge to the Augustinian orthodoxy. The millennium, as Kumar observes, "holds out the prospect of 'heaven on earth', of a 'new earth' which in its paradisiac perfection harks back to the Paradise before the Fall and anticipates the heavenly Paradise of the life to come." It is here, therefore, "that religion and utopia overlapped one another. The normal religious devaluation of the world—and hence of utopia—when set against the promise of other-worldly fulfilment, was here radically qualified" (17). Though deeply religious, the concept of the millennium with its expectations of a "new earth" and "heaven on earth" has thus contributed to the idea of utopia.

And yet, the millennium is not utopia as such because, according to Kumar, utopia is a uniquely modern concept emerged in specific historical

conditions. The core of the utopian vision is a fundamental secularism, defined against the medieval and Augustinian idea of the original sin; and its prerequisite, the idea of an essentially good human nature or at least the perfectibility of human nature. That is to say, Renaissance humanism provides one of the basic preconditions for the birth of *Utopia*, a name derived from Thomas More's famous book published in 1516. Several years before he wrote *Utopia*, More had given a series of public lectures on Augustine's *City of God*, and in a way More's *Utopia* can be read as a response to Augustine's religious concept of the best way of life. Gerard Wegemer has shown that More used Augustine's *City of God* mainly for contrast: "Utopia is 'not merely the best but the only [political order] which can rightly claim the name of a commonwealth' (237.38–9); the *City of God* denies that a truly just commonwealth is possible anywhere or at any time here on earth (xix.20–21)" (Wegemer 118). But as More envisioned it, utopia was precisely the good commonwealth here on earth, thus directly opposed to Augustine's City of God as a spiritual presence beyond this world. Despite More's religious piety and commitment, therefore, as Kumar remarks, "in his *Utopia* it is his humanism which is clearly uppermost. Over and above the specifically Christian influences, such as monasticism, it is More's veneration for Plato and his delight in the Roman satirists that most strongly shine through" (22). The utopians as More described them are not Christians but pagans, and they hold a fairly open attitude of tolerance toward different religious beliefs.

Barely within a year after the publication of More's *Utopia*, Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five Theses on the door of the church at Wittenburg (1517) and initiated a period of intense religious conflict between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation. The bitter strife and religious wars left Europe deeply divided, but also led to radical secularization when people no longer sought solution to social problems through the mediation of the church and the dictate of Christian doctrine. The decline of the medieval religious world-view, says Kumar, was "a necessary condition for the emergence of utopia" (22). There is yet another historic event at the time, to which More's *Utopia* owes much of its literary form, namely, the vogue of travelogue literature, a form made popular by the discovery of the New World. The customs and social institutions of distant countries, whether real or imagined, had always fed the craze for better conditions of being. "These travellers' tales were," as Kumar points out, "the raw material of utopias—almost incipient utopias" (23). Therefore we may say that the discovery of the New World provided yet another condition for the birth of utopia.

Since it can be so specifically defined in the historical context of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the discovery of the American continent, Kumar argues that "utopia is *not* universal. It appears only in societies with the classical and Christian heritage, that is, only in the West. Other societies have, in relative abundance, paradises, primitivist myths of a Golden Age of justice and equality, Cokaygne-type fantasies, even messianic beliefs; they do not have utopia" (19). Intriguingly, however, Kumar makes China the

only possible exception when he remarks that "of all non-western civilizations, China does indeed come closest to developing some concept of utopia." But based on an article by Jean Chesneaux concerning the possibility of a Chinese utopia, Kumar finally comes to the conclusion that, after all, of all the ideas Chesneaux emphasized, *datong* (Great Unity), *taiping* (Great Harmony), etc., "none of these 'utopian' elements cohered into a true utopia as they did in the West, with its similar utopian religious and mythical 'pre-history'. Nothing like a utopian *tradition* of writing was ever established in China" (428 n. 29). In a more recent book, Kumar offers some further discussion of the idea of a Chinese utopia, but unfortunately his discussion is still limited by Chesneaux's article published in the 1960's, which has a rather different purpose than Kumar's concerns. By tracing back to traditional egalitarian ideas like *datong, taiping, pingjun* (equalization), *juntian* (equal distribution of land) and the like, Chesneaux tried to explain why socialism was so successful in China. He meant to set up a cultural and historical context in which the political situation of contemporary China would seem to make better sense. "Even if implanted in the East by an external process, socialism has shown itself," Chesneaux argues, "capable of carrying out and realising the confused dreams that had been entertained by men for generations. In this sense it is not as 'foreign' to the East as one might sometimes think" (Chesneaux 78). The ideas he discussed are mostly Taoist and Buddhist, and mostly religious and political, though he also mentioned a few literary texts, including Tao Yuanming's (365–427) famous story of the *Peach Blossom Spring* and Li Ruzhen's (1763–1828) novel *The Mirror of Flowers,* in which we find a depiction of a state governed by women, what Chesneaux called a "feminist Utopia" (82–84).

For a discussion of utopia, however, Chesneaux's article falls short of a complete guide because it does not go very far in tracing the main source of utopian thought in the Chinese tradition, and it largely ignores the social and political philosophy of Confucianism. Under the influence of that article, therefore, Kumar could not provide a full view of the Chinese utopian vision and came to the dubious conclusion that all the Chinese utopian elements put together are still "a far cry from genuine utopianism." In the Chinese version, he goes on to say, the idea of utopia "is almost always coupled with messianic and millenarian expectations associated with the Buddhist *Maitreya* or *Mi-Lo-Fu*" (*Utopianism*, 34). Religious beliefs, according to Kumar, make utopia quite impossible in non-Western cultures. "One reason why it is difficult to find utopia in non-Western societies," he argues, "is that they have mostly been dominated by religious systems of thought" (35). This is, as I shall try to demonstrate, not a true picture of the Chinese situation, but the point I want to emphasize is not that Kumar is wrong and ill informed, since he is not a sinologist mainly concerned with the idea of a Chinese utopia. Far more important is Kumar's persuasive argument about the nature of utopia and its close relationship with secular thinking. Building on that argument, we may clearly see the existence of utopian thinking precisely in China. For Kumar, secularism is the necessary condition for

utopia, and he finds it missing in the East. We may argue, however, that traditionally the Chinese society, under the influence of Confucianism, is precisely a society not dominated by any religious system of thought, and that secularism is a remarkably salient feature of Chinese culture in general. The question here thus concerns the terms' translatability: Whether utopia is translatable across the gaps of cultural differences between the East and the West? Does the utopian desire find articulation in the Chinese tradition?

Utopian Tendencies in Confucianism

If secularism is a prerequisite for utopia, then the Chinese tradition under the influence of Confucianism provides a model of secular culture quite different from that of medieval Europe. Confucius as we find him in the *Analects* is a thinker largely concerned with the reality of this life rather than afterlife. We may have a glimpse of his rationalism when we read in the *Analects* that "the Master did not talk about uncanny things, violence, disorder, or deities" (Liu Baonan 146). He was rather ambivalent about gods and spirits, for he held that in attending religious rituals, one should "sacrifice as if ancestors were present, and sacrifice to the gods as if the gods were present" (Liu Baonan 53). This skeptical attitude is also evident from another passage, in which his disciple Ji Lu inquired about how to serve gods and the spirits properly. Confucius quickly dismissed the whole question, saying, "How can you serve the spirits, when you are not even able to serve human beings?" Ji Lu went on to ask about death, but the Master replied, "How can you know anything about death, when you don't even understand life?" (Liu Baonan 243). The question of death is surely for most religions a central concern, but Confucius was more concerned with the here and now than whatever was going on in heaven or the underworld. Many scholars have commented on Confucius's secular and rational attitude with regard to such matters. In a discussion of the religious and philosophical thinking in Confucius's time, Feng Youlan argues that "Confucius already held a skeptical attitude toward the existence of ghosts and spirits" (49). Zhou Yutong also points out that Confucius, who doubted the existence of gods and ghosts but did not discard rituals completely, intended to use religious rituals "as auxiliaries to his moral philosophy. Thus the ancestor worship and ritual offerings to heaven and earth performed by Confucius and the later Confucians were all outer forms meant to induce inner respect for antiquity and former kings, and to bring individual and social ethics to perfection. Thus Confucius's remarks on rituals had gone beyond old beliefs in ghosts and become a skilful application of the psychology of religion" (Zhou 385). Many sinologists also note the secular orientation of Confucianism. "The central concern of Confucius was the moral guidance of mankind, and the chief virtue for Confucius was humaneness," as Raymond Dawson remarks. "If his purpose was to restore a paradise on this earth, there was little room for religion" (44). The "paradise" here certainly does not refer to the biblical Garden of Eden, but to the ancient human kingdom

of Zhou under the reign of King Wen, which Confucius idealized as the perfect model for moral conduct and kingly rule. "I transmit but do not innovate," Confucius described himself in great humility. "I trust and devote myself to the study of the ancients" (Liu Baonan 134). He particularly admired the ancient dynasty of Zhou under the rule of King Wen, and this nostalgia for a wonderful time in antiquity, the adoration for the benevolence of ancient sage kings, constitute in the Chinese tradition something almost parallel to the lost paradise of Eden. The essential difference is, however, that this is a paradise lost through no original sin and with no religious ramifications.

For Confucius, the way back to ancient perfection is not through faith or divine intervention, not by waiting for the apocalypse or the Second Coming, but by a vigorous human effort at the present, in this world, by the individual strife of each moral being (*junzi*) to revive the culture of that lost golden age. The ultimate purpose of reviving the culture of the past is for the perfection to be achieved in the future. In Confucianism, therefore, the exemplary past is not just a golden age that one can only wistfully look back to and admire, but can never hope to recuperate. On the contrary, that ideal past has an important presence in social life, it can, and indeed often does, serve as a measure against which the present is judged and criticized. That is to say, the discourse of ancient perfection has an invariably critical function as a discourse of social allegory. In this context, then, we can understand the sense of urgency so often attached to the teaching of Confucius, as evident in some of the conversations between the teacher and his disciples. When his favorite student Yan Yuan asked him what one should do to achieve benevolence, the supreme virtue in Confucius's teaching, the Master replied:

> Restraining one's self and reviving the observance of the rites would lead to benevolence. The day one restrains one's self and revives the observance of the rites, all under Heaven will call it benevolence. It is on one's self that one depends for achieving benevolence. Does it need to rely on others? (Liu Baonan 262).

In the Confucian program of education, then, it is the individual effort at self-discipline and following the ancient rites that will lead to the socially good; and more importantly, it is a human effort unsustained by divine intervention and oriented toward future perfection. This is perhaps where the Confucian vision differs from the Western yearning for paradise or the Greek nostalgia for the ancient Golden Age. Of course, Confucius often mentioned heaven or heaven's mandate, which indicates the presence of religious and transcendental ideas in Confucianism, but by and large the Confucian tradition is definitely more concerned with social and ethical issues in the human world than the realm of the divine. Under the influence of that tradition, Chinese culture is open and tolerant toward different religious beliefs and may be seen as uniquely secular in many ways, when compared with many other cultures in the world.[2]

"Whatever else the classical utopias might say or fail to say," says Kumar, "all were attacks on the radical theory of the original sin. Utopia is

always a measure of the moral heights man can attain using only his natural powers 'purely by the natural light'" (*Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 28). That may well apply to Confucius's idea of a virtuous man who relies on himself for achieving benevolence, "using only his natural powers." Here the underlying idea is the confidence in man's own nature, his moral strength and perfectibility. And that, of course, is an entrenched idea in the Confucian tradition. In his remark that "people are close to one another in nature, but their customs and habits set them apart" (Liu Baonan 367), Confucius did not clearly state whether the nature of man is good or bad, but he did acknowledge that our nature is malleable. By and large, he did not concern himself so much with human nature as with human life in its practical, social dimensions. His student Zigong observed that "What we get to know is the Master's teachings about ancient writings, but what we don't get to know is his teachings about human nature and the *tao* of heaven" (Liu Baonan 98). Many traditional commentators, however, insisted that Confucius had already believed in the goodness of human nature and that there was no discrepancy between the two great thinkers in the tradition, Confucius and Mencius, even though they lived more than a hundred years apart. In commenting on Zigong's remark quoted above, Liu Baonan maintains that "the idea of good human nature was first articulated by Confucius. When he said that people are 'close to one another in nature,' he meant that people with their different nature are all close to the good" (99). Liu even quoted Mencius in his commentary on Confucius, maintaining that "because Gaozi and others at the time put forward various specious arguments, Mencius felt it necessary to affirm definitely that human nature is good. Confucius, on the other hand, only remarked that people are close to one another in nature, for his intention was to call people's attention to their customs and habits, not to make a comment on human nature, and so he did not need to put it directly that human nature is good" (367). In a modern discussion of ancient Chinese views on human nature, Xu Fuguan also argues that the "nature" in Confucius's phrase "close to one another in nature" must have been good rather than bad, and that "Confucius was actually speaking of nature as being good when he said that people all have a similar nature" (Xu 89). All such readings and interpretations may not have succeeded in proving that Confucius actually believed in a good human nature, but they have had a great impact on the way Confucius's remarks are understood in China.

In the Confucian tradition, it is Mencius who gave us the classic expression of the idea of an inherently good human nature. This idea emerged, as Liu Baonan noted, in a debate between Mencius and another philosopher, Gaozi, who maintained that human nature is neither good nor bad, just as water is not predisposed to run in any particular direction on the ground. Depending on the geographical condition, it can be channeled to flow to the east or the west. Taking up Gaozi's hydraulic metaphor, however, Mencius ingeniously changed the horizontal view to a vertical one and pointed out that the nature of water is such that it always runs downward. "Human nature is as necessarily good as water necessarily comes down," says Men-

cius. "There is no man who is not good, just as there is no water that does not run downward" (Jiao 433–34). Of course there is evil in the human world, but that, he insists, is the work of harsh environment and circumstances rather than something bad in human nature as such. Just as water can be forced to go up by mechanic means against its nature, so can human beings be misled to crime and evil. According to Mencius, human beings possess the "four beginnings" or four innate potentialities to be compassionate, to feel shame, to behave in modesty and courtesy, and to know the right and the wrong (Jiao 139). In other words, human beings have the roots of good in their nature which, when fully developed, will make them perfect. Unlike the sinners in the medieval Christian view, "all men can become sages like Yao and Shun" (Jiao 477). When we recall Augustine's view of human nature as "a corrupt root," we may appreciate the fundamental difference between such an optimistic Confucian humanism and the stern view of the original sin in the medieval Christian church.

For utopia, however, what is important is not so much the idea of a good human nature or perfectibility, but the social and political theories coming out of it. Mencius advocated a "humane government" ultimately based on the idea of a good human nature. What he imagined as an ideal society has the definite mark of a classical utopia, where people dress in silk and have meat for their meals, the young are well schooled and the elderly do not need to overwork (Jiao 33–35). In the reality of the time, known as the period of the Warring States, however, such a simple life of rural utopia would still seem far beyond reach, and what Mencius saw around him was a miserable picture: "There is fat meat in the royal kitchen and well-fed horses in the royal stable, but people look hungry and haggard, and corpses dead from starvation lie in the fields. This is as though to lead animals to devour people alive" (Jiao 37). This last metaphor sounds very much like a similar critique in More's *Utopia*, where the "enclosure" of cultivated land for pasture in the expansion of wool trade is portrayed by a vivid image: "Your sheep," says Raphael Hythloday, the narrator of Utopia, "that commonly are so meek and eat so little; now, as I hear, they become so greedy and fierce that they devour human beings themselves" (More 63). In both we find the image of animals devouring human beings as a sharp contrast to the idealized picture of a utopian society of peace and harmony, and in both the utopian vision thus serves more as a device of social critique than a blue print for reality.

Mencius's "humane government" remained an ideal or even a social fantasy about a just and good society; and so did Confucius's desire to turn his moral and political ideas into reality. He had dozens of fine disciples who could, one might hope, when perfectly trained in the rigorous program of a Confucian education, serve as counselors to kings or emperors and achieve moral perfection and political harmony everywhere in China. In a way, such a hope is not unlike the famous Platonic idea of philosopher-king, but just as Plato was clearly aware of the unrealistic nature of his notion, Confucius also knew that he was going against the grain of the times. The

idea that either philosophers should be kings or kings should take to the pursuit of philosophy, Plato admits, may very well be "likened to the greatest wave of paradox," one that is "likely to wash us away on billows of laughter and scorn" (Plato 712). In the case of Confucius, the Master traveled from one kingdom to another, trying to convince the rulers of the value of his political ideas, but he never quite succeeded. In the words of a gatekeeper who left us with a famous character sketch, Confucius was "a fellow who does what he knows to be impossible to accomplish" (Liu Baonan 325). Through repeated disappointment and frustration, however, even a saint might feel that his patience was beginning to wear thin. Thus even Confucius sometimes complained. The failure to have his moral and political ideas realized in his time, the difficulties and frustration he suffered, one would imagine, must have given rise, at least at some particularly vexing moments, to a flight of fancies, unreal hopes, desires for an imagined place: a strange, faraway place where the prospect of a better society according to Confucius would not seem so utterly implausible.

That is exactly what we find in the *Analects* where Confucius says with a sigh: "If the *tao* should fail to prevail, I would get on a raft and sail out to sea" (Liu Baonan 90). Confucius himself did not specify where he would want to go, but in elaborate traditional commentaries, many interpreters suggest that the destination of Confucius's voyage might be somewhere to the east, in the Korean peninsula, the home of "eastern barbarians." "Unlike those from the other three directions, the eastern barbarians have a pliable nature," they claim. Confucius "would ride on a raft to reach the eastern barbarians because their country had yielded to the moral influence of ancient sages and so the *tao* could prevail there" (Liu Baonan 91). That is to say, the Koreans, unlike the primitive tribes that inhabited the other corners of the earth, had a pliable nature that rendered them susceptible to Confucius's moral influence. On a similar remark in the *Analects* that "the Master wanted to dwell among the nine barbarian clans," Liu Baonan claims that these words, "like the remark of sailing to sea on a raft, all refer to Korea. Since the Master's teaching was not adopted in China, he wanted to let his *tao* prevail in a foreign land, for in that country there was influence of the benevolent and the good" (Liu Baonan 185). The commentator wants to make sure that the reader understand Confucius's desire to "sail out to sea" as clearly distinct from the escapist idea of "avoiding the world in dark seclusion," an all-too-familiar desire among the Chinese literati who often wished to live like a recluse released from social responsibilities, while comfortably enjoying the beauty of nature. Even though Confucius said that he would sail out to sea and dwell among the simple barbarians to the east, the Master was hoping, so the commentator tells us, that "the *tao* should prevail," if not in China, at least in some far off land beyond the sea (Liu Baonan 91). Such commentaries are perhaps little more than fanciful speculations, but they are intriguing speculations nonetheless. Korea in Confucius's time was certainly an exotic "foreign land," a fertile ground for constructing imaginary communities not unlike the Utopia as More envisioned or the

New Atlantis in Francis Bacon's scientific and literary imagination. The natives there were thought to be barbaric and primitive, and yet pure and innocent in their pristine natural condition. Given the right kind of influence and education, they could become agents for implementing the philosopher's social and political ideas. In describing the history of Utopia, More says that the ruler Utopus, having conquered the land, "brought its rude, uncouth inhabitants to such a high level of culture and humanity that they now surpass almost every other people" (111). This is certainly very close to the imaginary picture of the "eastern barbarians" as we find in traditional commentaries on the Confucian *Analects*. It is true that Confucius or Mencius never depicted a complete picture of a literary utopia, but there are moments in their teachings that have an unmistakably utopian character. In those passages such as Confucius desiring to sail out to sea on a raft or to dwell among barbarian tribes far from China, and in the commentator's emphasis on the moral and political meaning of those passages, we already have all the basic ingredients for making utopias: a sea voyage, a mysterious foreign land yet to be discovered and explored, and some innocently naive and barbaric natives like noble savages, whose nature and condition are infinitely malleable so that the ideal of a good society can yet be realized on earth. All it takes now is a literary imagination to put these ingredients together as some sort of a narrative or description, and to draw the picture of a perfect, ideal society.

Literary Variations

In Chinese literature, the poem "Big Rat" (*Shuo shu*) in the *Book of Poetry* is perhaps the earliest poetic expression of the desire for a happy land or an ideal society. It may not be truly utopian for the lack of an elaborate description of the happy land, but if we agree with Ruth Levitas that the essential element of utopia is the basic "desire for a better way of being" (191), then this little ancient poem definitely articulates such a desire. The first stanza of the poem reads:

> Big rat, big rat,
> Don't eat my grains.
> I've fed you three years,
> And nothing I've gained.
> I'll leave you and go
> To a land of happiness.
> Oh that happy, happy land
> Is where I long to rest (*Maoshi* 359).

The poem has the form of a typical folk-song of several stanzas, with many lines of repetition with slight variation in each stanza. Although it does not describe what the "land of happiness" looks like, this simple poem does give voice to the dissatisfaction with the present and, reminiscent of Confucius's wish to sail out to sea and dwell among the nine barbarian clans, it articulates the desire to seek a better society elsewhere, away from the here and

now. According to traditional commentators, the poem is a political satire against a ruler's "greed" and his "heavy taxes," but also the expression of a desire "to abandon the king for another land of happiness and virtue" (*Maoshi* 359). In other words, the poem has traditionally been read as a social and political allegory, as an expression of the desire for a better way of living. Because the *Book of Poetry* is an important Confucian canon, this little poem occupies a significant place in the Chinese utopian literary imagination.

From the ancient folk song, we now move to Cao Cao (155–220), a famous statesman and poet in the period of the Three Kingdoms, who depicted in one of his "Drinking Songs" an unmistakably utopian vision that drew on Mencius and a number of other ancient sources. He imagined a community in "a time of peace, when no official would knock on the door"; when all those in power are "good and wise," and "no feud or strife" are reported to magistrates. Barns are stuffed with grains, the elderly need not overwork, and people all treat each other as kinsfolk. "No valuables will be lost even dropped on the road"; there are no prisoners, nor executions. And the poem ends on an optimistic note that extends benevolence beyond even the human realm: "The dew of grace covers all plants, animals and insects" (Cao 4–5). Cao Cao's lived experience, however, was quite different from the utopian society he imagined, for he had led many military expeditions, gone through countless battles and wars, and laid the foundation for the Kingdom of Wei with sword and fire. We may appreciate even more the utopian vision he presented in the poem discussed above when we contrast that vision to the horrific battle scenes portrayed in his other poems. In one of his elegiac poems, he described the powerful ministers and generals at the Han emperor's court as "Apes dressed up in caps and robes,/With little knowledge for their ambitious plan" (4). In another poem, he wrote about the strife for gains among different rival forces and the devastating effect of war: "Men's armors are infested with lice;/Tens of thousands fell dead./White bones are exposed in wilderness,/And no cock crows for a thousand miles./My heart broke when I thought that one/Out of a hundred may only survive" (4). The utopian vision was evidently born out of a desperate need to find peace and happiness away from the brutal reality of war, as a sort of imaginary relief of the horror of devastation he experienced in the real world.

In classical Chinese literature, the most famous literary utopia with some concrete description is undoubtedly Tao Yuanming's (365–427) elegant narration in *Peach Blossom Spring*, a work some two hundred years later than Cao's poems. In Tao Yuanming's work, the poet let us have a glimpse of a community in peace and harmony that is quite out of this world. The hidden community is discovered by a fisherman, a native of Wuling, who has to go, as in many other utopian narratives, through a narrow path from his mundane reality to find himself in a secluded and totally different world. In an elegant passage, Tao describes the fisherman's discovery of the Peach Blossom Spring, which has since become absolutely classic in the Chinese literary tradition:

> He was gliding along a small river, quite oblivious of how far he had gone, when suddenly he came upon a stretch of peach trees in blossom. For a couple of hundred feet along the banks on both sides, there were no shrubs mixed among the peach trees, and he saw many fragrant plants and a lush green strewn with the petals of fallen blossoms. Quite amazed, the fisherman rowed on, curious to find the end of this grove. It ended at the source of the river, and there he found a mountain with a small cave in front, from which some light seemed to come through. So he abandoned his boat and entered the opening. At first, the cave was so narrow that it allowed only one person to get through. Further down a few dozen steps, however, it suddenly opened up and led to an expanse of level land with rows and rows of houses. There were fertile farm fields, clear ponds, mulberry trees, bamboo groves and the like. Roads and thoroughfares crossed one another, and one could hear cocks crowing and dogs barking in the neighborhood. Men and women moving around or working in the fields all dressed the same way as people outside. The elderly and the young enjoyed themselves alike in leisure and contentment. (165)

Like More's Utopia, this community in Peach Blossom Spring was isolated from the rest of the world by water, mountains, and dense forests, discovered by a fisherman after going through a narrow passage. Once there, he found a self-sufficient and self-governed community that formed a sharp contrast to the world outside. People there told the fisherman that "their ancestors found this inaccessible place when they took their wives, children, and relatives in flight from the tyrannical rule of the Emperor of Qin, and since then they had never gone out. So they had been separated from people outside. They asked what dynasty it was now, and had no idea that there had been Han, let alone Wei and Jin" (Tao 166). The sense of timelessness is important for all utopias as they are conceived to be a good society that stays unchanged, a perfect social condition that allows neither decline nor the need for improvement. As a stranger from the outside, the fisherman represents an element of connection with the reality of the outside and the present: he is a man from the world of changes and finitude that contrasts with the timeless world of the utopian community. As an outsider he got a lot of attention and was invited to every household for meals and wine, whereas he told his hosts stories of the outside world with its wars, sufferings, and dynastic change. He took leave after a couple of days and was told not to mention this place to people outside. When he came out and found his boat, however, he marked the route carefully and reported to the magistrate in the area. This is not just a breach of the agreement to which the fisherman has committed himself, but it also represents a threat of the reality of time and change to the eternal and perfect condition of utopia. To preserve the utopian vision, the story has to end in a mysterious manner: thus several men were dispatched with the fisherman to find the secluded community, but for all their effort, Peach Blossom Spring simply vanished without a trace and could never be found again. It has since remained an intriguing dream and illusion in the Chinese literary imagination.

In his famous *Ranking of Poetry*, Zhong Rong (459–518) characterized Tao Yuanming as "the paragon of all hermit poets, past and present"

(Zhong 41). In *Peach Blossom Spring*, however, Tao Yuanming did not write the usual "hermit poetry," the kind of individual fantasies about spirits and immortals. Rather, what he described is unmistakably a farming village, a community of simple, earthy, and kind-hearted people. He wrote in the poem:

Together they engaged in farming the land,
And took rest when the sun had set. . . .
Spring silkworms produced long threads,
And no king's tax was levied on autumn crops. (Tao 167)

For a fourth-century Chinese poet, the picture of a peaceful society that paid no tax to the king's coffers was, to say the least, rather bold imagination. Many poets in later time felt inspired by Tao Yuanming and wrote their own variations on the theme of Peach Blossom Spring, but most of these sequels and variations missed the crucial point in Tao Yuanming's original poem because they were precisely the sort of "hermit poetry" that Tao Yuanming did not write, for they made their Peach Blossom Spring a fairyland with Taoist immortals as inhabitants. This is, for example, how the famous Tang poet Wang Wei (701–761) described the residents in his *Ballad of Peach Blossom Spring*: "First they left the human world to escape from troubled spots,/They were said to have become immortals and never returned." When the fisherman went back to the old route, wrote Wang Wei, "In spring, peach blossom waters were everywhere,/But the abode of immortals was nowhere to be found" (98–99). In Wang Wei's poem, then, the fisherman represents a thinly disguised Taoist adept in search of immortality, and the elusive Peach Blossom Spring becomes the fairyland where, for a brief moment, the fisherman encountered the mythical immortals.

Another Tang poet Meng Haoran (689–740) has a poem about Wuling, the place where Tao Yuanming's fisherman supposedly found the mysterious Peach Blossom Spring. Here again, the emphasis is on the land of the immortals beyond the world of mundane reality:

Wuling has narrow waterways, and the oar
Guides the boat into a blooming forest;
No one knows how deep the immortals reside
In the shaded place whence the river flows. (Meng 152)

In yet another variation on the theme of the Peach Blossom Spring, Liu Yuxi (772–842) changed Tao Yuanming's simple villagers into superhuman immortals, and the fisherman's discovery was portrayed with more drama and mystery:

The cave was dark with foggy gloom,
But yielded to an ethereal light after some steps.
The fairies were startled to find a mortal man,
And asked how did he find his way hither?
Soon all tension melted, and with smile
They inquired about the world of mortals.

At the end of the poem, Liu Yuxi developed the idea of contrast between the fairyland with its pure and ethereal quality and the muddy world of human trivialities:

> Covered with peach blossoms, the water shone like mirrors;
> Sadly the heart of dust could not be washed clean.
> The immortals' abode vanished without a trace;
> Now only the river and mountains yet remain. (Liu Yuxi 346)

Water shining like "mirror" and "the heart of dust" are all familiar Buddhist metaphors, which effectively and fundamentally change Tao Yuanming's original Peach Blossom Spring from a recognizably human community into a fairyland beyond the human world. In Liu Yuxi's poem, then, we find a locale quite different in spirit and intent from Tao Yuanming's simple agrarian utopia.

It is the great poet Su Shi in the Song dynasty that pointed out the distortion of Tao Yuanming's original theme in later variations. "Most of the legends about Peach Blossom Spring that circulate widely," he observes, "exaggerate the story beyond credibility. A careful examination of what Yuanming described will show that he only said that the ancestors of those people had come to the place in flight from the tyrannical rule of the Emperor of Qin. Therefore those the fisherman saw were their descendents, not immortals from the time of Qin" (Quoted in Cai 10). The point is that the Peach Blossom Spring is a human community, not the land of mythical and immortal beings. Wang Anshi (1021–1086), the well-known poet and political reformer, is one of the few in the tradition that have truly developed the utopian theme in Tao Yuanming's work. His *Ballad of Peach Blossom Spring* is a worthy sequel to Tao Yuanming's own poem with an added sense of the sharp contrast between the ideal of a peaceful community and the reality of war and tyranny throughout history. The poem begins with a description of the tyranny of the Qin: "Half of Qin population perished under the great wall./Not only the old men of Shangshan but also farmers/ In Peach Blossom Spring tried to escape it all." The building of the great wall is here evoked as a testimony to the tyrannical rule of the First Emperor of Qin, because it was a project realized through forced labor and at the cost of thousands of lives. Following Tao Yuanming, Wang Anshi made it clear that the ancestors of those farmers, like the hermits known as the four White-headed Men of Shangshan, found a secret place to hide while fleeing from unbearable tyranny. He then describes how those people lived in seclusion:

> For generations they planted peach trees,
> Gathered flowers, ate fruit, made fire with twigs.
> Their descendants grew in separation from the world,
> Knowing fathers and sons, but not king and subjects.

In Tao Yuanming's poem, farmers in Peach Blossom Spring do not pay taxes on their crops, while in Wang Anshi's poem, the imaginary community is organized on an even more radical principle as people recognize only

kinship relations, not the hierarchy of ruler and the ruled. The separation between Peach Blossom Spring and the outside world is reinforced in a contrast of memory and knowledge: people outside hardly remembered the terrible past of Qin, while the inhabitants in Peach Blossom Spring knew nothing about the fisherman's time:

> Who in the world could remember the Qin of old?
> While those in the mountain knew not the Jin today.
> Hearing that Chang'an was covered by the dust of war,
> They looked outward and shed tears in the spring wind.

Chang'an was the capital of Han and Western Jin, it serves here as a synecdoche to represent China in general. The political intent of the poem becomes even more clear at the end when the poet pronounces the relentless truth that much of history is suffering under tyrannical rulers like the Emperor of Qin, while ancient sage kings like Shun remain a legend, an illusory hope and wishful impossibility (Wang Anshi 68). It is true that the Peach Blossom Spring in Tao Yuanming's and Wang Anshi's texts is very much an agrarian society, quite different from the typical urban utopias as we find in the West. After all, Tao Yuanming lived 1,200 years before Thomas More, and the different social conditions of their times inevitably had an impact on their respective utopian visions. What makes Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* and Wang Anshi's variation definitely utopian, however, is the human and secular character of this secluded place: it is an imaginary community of human beings, not a fairyland of immortals.

Despite its fictive nature, however, utopia has a particularly realistic character that makes the genre more important as the articulation of a social and political ideas rather than the manifestation of artistic ingenuity. Wilde points out this realistic character when he says, "Progress is the realisation of Utopias" (28). When it was first conceived as the model of a good society in Thomas More, Francis Bacon and others, utopia indeed formed part of the idea of progress, a major concept in the imaginary social constructions of modernity. As Roland Schaer argues, utopia brings literature and politics together in an especially close relationship: "On the one hand, utopia is an imaginary projection onto a fictitious space created by the text of the narrative; on the other hand, the project it sets forth assumes implementation and as such it veers toward the side of history while simultaneously drawing its sustenance from fiction" (Schaer 5). Utopia is essentially the concept of a secular paradise, the imaginary model of a social theory. It is this transformability of art into life that Wilde might have seen as essential for his understanding of socialism.

Utopia is, however, a fiction, a "no place" as its Greek etymological sense indicates; and the narrator in More's *Utopia*, Hythloday, means something like a "nonsense peddler." These words point to the fictive nature of utopia; and indeed utopia is ideal only because it is not real. The utopian social planning and regulation already appear in More's *Utopia* as systematic control of everyday life and severe restrictions on personal freedom. The utopians, for example, cannot travel freely and individually, but they

"travel in groups, taking a letter from the governor granting leave to travel and fixing a day of return. . . . Anyone who takes upon himself to leave his district without permission, and is caught without the governor's letter, is treated with contempt, brought back as a runaway, and severely punished. If he is bold enough to try it a second time, he is made a slave" (More 145). This is, to put it mildly, a disturbing dark side of utopia that remains a threatening shadow so long as it is only a literary fiction, but it turns to be unbearably depressing when it becomes the political reality of a totalitarian society. That is of course what many people perceive to have happened in China under Mao's iron rule, in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. That is also what great twentieth-century anti-utopian novels, such as Zamyatin's *We*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* try to depict as the nightmarish counter-image of utopia.

The highly symbolic demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the tremendous changes taking place in China in the 1990's and into this new century all clearly demonstrate that socialism as state-planned economy and the "dictatorship of the proletariat" has failed. People might ask: Is it true that the utopian vision of a good society has the nasty tendency of turning into its ugly opposite? Utopia, however, need not be completely identified with socialism, and to blame utopia for all the failings of socialist countries, as Kumar insists, "is like blaming Christianity for the Inquisition" (*Utopianism*, 99). Ultimately, utopia is the desire for change and a vision of that change. It "confronts reality not with a measured assessment of the possibilities of change but with the demand for change" (*Utopianism*, 107). That is to say, after all the development in the last five hundred years since Thomas More, the concept of utopia is reduced to its most basic starting point, namely, the very human desire for a better society beyond reality, or as Levitas puts it, "desire for a better way of being." In that sense, of course, utopia or the ideal of a good society will always be alive and will always sustain our hope and determination to work for the future. Given what we have experienced in the 20th century, however, we must always be alert to the danger of grand ideas, including that of utopia, which deprive human beings of their individuality in the name of collective interest; and we must realize that there is always a gap between the ideal and the real, between utopia as a concept and the reality of social and political life. Perhaps it is one of the most cruel ironies or dialectics in history that the hope for a perfect society contains the very seed of its negation, that the belief in human nature as essentially good should have elicited the worst of human greed for power and domination. And yet, humanity cannot give up the hope for a better society and better life, even though there will always be a gap between the ideal and the real. How to bridge that gap, to reach an equilibrium, and to achieve a good balance between individual rights and collective responsibilities: that is not just a question for politicians, but an important question for everyone of us to think about as we move into the new century and new millennium. In any case, a future with-

out vision is quite unthinkable, so the utopian vision will live on. If the reality of this world has not been as desirable as the imagined ideal society, it is not the ideal society that we have to blame. Let me then conclude on a truly optimistic note that the utopian vision of an ideal society will lead us on, and that with so much experience of failed projects and frustrated expectations, we may just do it better in the future as we build a more open, tolerant, and humane society respectful of individual rights as well as collective interests, a society that will combine the best of the East and the West.

NOTES

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2. I have discussed the relationship between secular tendencies and religious toleration in China (see Zhang in the References).

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